

EXCERPT



Companions in Suffering *Comfort for Times of Loss and Loneliness*

June 9, 2020 | \$16, 192 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-4586-6

For Anyone Enduring a Long Marathon of Suffering

Have you felt cast out by your circumstances, looking through a window at others enjoying life, whether at work, at church, or in your neighborhood? You can see their joy through the glass between you, but they don't seem to see your pain on the other side. Or maybe they see you on the outside but seem to back slightly away from the window in fear that your pain will seep into their lives. They politely distance themselves as if from one with a communicable disease that they are not vaccinated for.

I felt cast out by my own life circumstances—first as I walked into church weekly to sit in the pew on the row that our family of four had usually sat. Now we were only three, obviously missing a vital member of our family. While other families grew, mine shrank. Weekly I was confronted with that difference between me and those my family had previously fellowshiped with.

I felt other.

After I moved home and was diagnosed with cancer, this feeling of being on the outside looking in descended on me again. Though I didn't need chemotherapy for my breast cancer, I wore down as I recovered from one major surgery just to discover I needed another. And then another.

I missed one Sunday, two Sundays, then three, four, and a half dozen more over a nine-month period. I realized, like it or not, that our Sunday sermon series, Sunday school lessons, and women's group in my church, which I had previously been an integral part of, all went on without me.

This wasn't an evil conspiracy on the part of my church family but a simple fact of life. I could not blame folks for moving on with their lives. The churches I attended on both coasts were full of lovely people who sincerely cared for me physically and spiritually. But neither could I ignore the alienation I felt as I was left behind while they moved on with the normal rhythm of church life. Whether from medical necessity or broken relationships, feelings of alienation in the midst of a long season of suffering are quite normal, and they can have devastating consequences for our emotional well-being.

I have felt such alienation in the midst of pain quite often. Looking back at those times, though, I recognize that my feelings didn't reflect the truth among those in my church and community, and the rest of this book will reinforce the real ways we find community in suffering with others in the body of Christ, living and dead. But for a long season that feeling of alienation endured. I felt outside. I felt other, an orphan left on my own to navigate a path I didn't understand.

I have heard sad anecdotes about babies neglected in orphanages who have learned not to cry when they have a need because no one will come to help them. They ran out of tears, but their needs were still there. They often develop attachment disorders that make it extremely hard for them to attach to adoptive families when the time comes. I have at times found myself feeling weariness and detachment in my own long story of suffering.



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Why cry? Why call out to friends for help? And more devastating to consider, why pray? I found there came a point in our journeys when the tears cease, not because circumstances got better or the weight on our shoulders lightened, but simply because we are dehydrated. We don't have any tears left, and the weights on us keep us from even lifting our heads to see where we are in our journeys. Detaching from dark emotions seems the only way to survive. Yet how can we survive if we detach from God, his body, and his Word?

It is likely that you are reading this because you are carrying the heavy weight of suffering on your shoulders or love someone else who is. Maybe the weight is in the form of an unrelenting illness. Maybe it is the loss of a loved one in death or a broken relationship that you cannot mend on your own. Each of these is a heavy weight of suffering that seems to alienate us from others. Some find excuses for not being around us because deep in their psyche they perceive suffering as a communicable disease they don't want to catch. But sufferers often alienate themselves as well.

This book is for anyone enduring a long marathon of suffering who despairs of finding help or hope again. This book is for folks who don't cry anymore because their emotions are spent. And this book is for those persevering with their suffering loved ones. It can be as emotionally draining to watch a loved one suffer as to experience the suffering directly yourself.

If you have run out of tears and feel alone in your ongoing grief, if you are so weary from crying you feel detached from your emotions, God has not left you as an orphan. You have companions on this journey, first and foremost with Christ himself. But there is also companionship with his body, your brothers and sisters in the faith. We find companions among brothers and sisters still living and among those who have gone on before us. Finally, there is companionship and fellowship found in the words of Scripture, preserved eternally for us for our instruction, our comfort, and even our tears.

Come sit with me for a while in the pages of this book. In the midst of the alienation and detachment that long seasons of suffering can cause, may you too find deep community as I have with Christ, his Word preserved eternally for us, and fellow believers that encourage us with their testimonies of suffering, endurance, and hope. You need these varied avenues to community desperately, as each gives different resources that help you to persevere. God hasn't left you alone to find these resources on your own.

Jesus promises in John 14:8, "I will not leave you as orphans, I am coming to you."

—Taken from chapter one, "On the Outside Looking In"

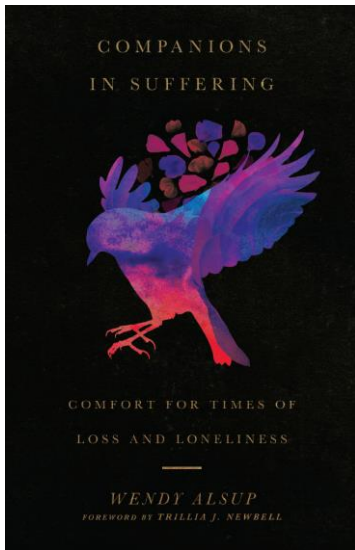


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ENDORSEMENTS



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“*Companions in Suffering* is an honest, clear, biblical, practical, and wise book, speaking to many of the issues we wrestle with most. If you are suffering, Wendy Alsup will be an open and encouraging companion.”

—Andrew Wilson, teaching pastor of King’s Church London

A Way Forward in the Midst of Suffering

“Few things are more isolating for a person than suffering, and that isolation only compounds the pain that suffering brings upon a person. Wendy Alsup understands this pain well and has given us all a gift in the midst of her suffering. Through her own narrative, the stories of others, and the testimony of Scripture, Wendy reminds us that we truly are never alone in our suffering.”

—Courtney Reissig, author of *Glory in the Ordinary: Why Your Work in the Home Matters to God*

“No one who is really suffering is interested in trite answers or simple formulas; we want something substantive. We want to hear from someone who has been there and is honest about the pain but offers genuine insight into what it looks like to persevere through the pain. That’s what Wendy Alsup does in this book. While it’s personal, it isn’t personality-driven or all about her personal story, though her personal story gives her writing credibility. Instead, this book is saturated with insight into Scripture, presenting meaty truths that make a difference, helping to make sense of and bring peace and rest in the midst of the lowest days and the hardest things.”

—Nancy Guthrie, author and Bible teacher

“*Companions in Suffering* is filled with encouragement from a fellow companion who knows Christ and the power of his resurrection, because she has shared deeply in the fellowship of his suffering. This stewardship of her suffering offers the life-giving help and hope that only Christ can bring.”

—Karen Hodge, coordinator of women’s ministries for the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) and author of *Transformed: Life-Taker to Life-Giver and Life-Giving Leadership*

“Wendy welcomes us into her tent of suffering, encouraging us to enter into others’ tents and welcome them into ours. She doesn’t do so with empty platitudes or false promises but with the hope of the gospel and the truth of Scripture. In your own sufferings, be comforted by God through Wendy’s witness.”

—Kristen Wetherell, author of *Fight Your Fears* and coauthor of *Hope When It Hurts*

“Through the use of personal pictures and biblical reflections, Wendy Alsup offers all of us the way forward in the midst of suffering. There are no easy fixes here or trite comforts, but there is a steady stream of personal, sympathetic anecdotes and Christ-centered encouragements. Suffering can be lonesome, but Wendy reminds us that we never really suffer alone. Jesus Christ was a man of sorrows and thus sympathizes with our sorrows as well. If you or someone you know is suffering, allow Wendy to come alongside and help you see Jesus again.”

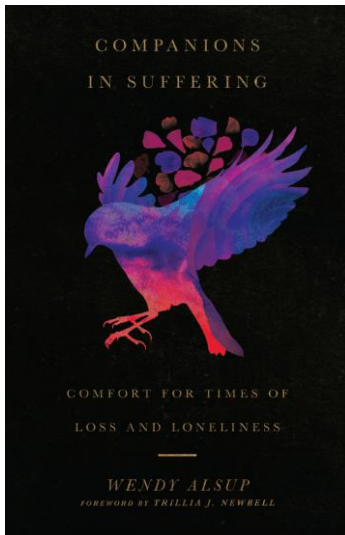
—Tony Carter, lead pastor of East Point Church, Atlanta



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Q & A



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"Companions in Suffering is at once a deeply personal book and one with wide application as Alsup masterfully weaves her own story with sound scriptural application. She doesn't offer easy answers but something far richer: compassion and companionship for those journeying with someone who is suffering or for those walking through the valley of the shadow in their own lives."

—Michelle Van Loon, author of *Born to Wander: Recovering the Value of our Pilgrim Identity*

You Are Not Alone.

What experiences from your own life led you to write *Companions in Suffering*?

Wendy Alsup: During the years of watching my marriage end and then being diagnosed with breast cancer as a single mom while trying to claw my way back to normalcy, I experienced a particular kind of acute loneliness I had not ever experienced before. It was almost like being outside of my own body, watching the rest of the world go on with their lives while I sunk, weighted down by my burdens, struggling just to survive. I found companionship I needed to survive in unexpected places, and those times of camaraderie were oxygen to my drowning soul. There is more companionship, camaraderie, and solidarity than we realize, for suffering is efficient at alienating us from the inside out. I hope to aid others who feel alienated by suffering to find the kind of solidarity and companionship that equips us to endure with hope.

What is the main idea in this book, and what do you hope your voice conveys to readers?

Wendy: Though we often feel utterly alone when we suffer physical illness or relational crisis, we are not actually alone. The solidarity we find with Christ, the Scriptures, living saints, and dead ones are deeply life-giving when we are depleted of our own resources.

I write practical theology that is both compassionate and exhorting. I hope to offer a voice of encouragement that starts with a solid understanding of the heavy weight of grief and struggle that long-term suffering places on our shoulders. And I hope to build trust with my readers that earns the right to exhort fellow sufferers in strong ways to persevere.

What points of encouragement do you want readers to take away from *Companions in Suffering*?

Wendy:

- They are not alone.
- God meets them in their struggle and has not left them as an orphan to navigate this journey without help.
- God preserved help in his eternal Scriptures so that we would not feel shame for the deep emotional burdens we carry.
- Some folks are dis-abled to comfort us, because they have not yet learned that kind of comfort from the feet of Jesus. That's okay, and there are other places to look for that comfort.



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